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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the whole language approach, widely used for first-language reading instruction, is the most appropriate means for teaching reading to learners of English as a second language (ESL). Drawing on research evidence, seven basic tenets of whole language instruction are explained and applied to ESL reading instruction. These include the following: (1) lessons should proceed from the whole to parts; (2) lessons should be learner-centered; (3) lessons should have meaning and purpose for learners; (4) lessons should engage groups of students in social interaction; (5) receptive and generative linguistic competence should be developed simultaneously; (6) students' native languages should be used for instruction; and (7) teachers should help second language learners decrease their affective filters. Contains 39 references. (MSE)

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Whole Language: A Whole New World for ESL Programs

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Whole Language: A Whole New World for ESL Programs

A responsibility of Teachers of English as a second/foreign language (TESL/TEFL) is to make reading in a second language (L2) possible for readers of another languages. These teachers have been applying such approaches as Grammar-Translation and Basal Readers to reach this goal. Unfortunately, that these traditional approaches have not always met with success; they have, in fact, caused some teachers to turn to more innovative approaches. One of these approaches beginning to interest ESL and EFL teachers is whole language. The crucial concern for these ESL teachers is how to apply whole language, a philosophical belief system widely used for first language (L1) instruction, to L2 reading instruction.

In the whole language perspective, readers are regarded as meaning creators. They construct meanings from texts by applying cueing systems such as orthographics, graphophonics, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. They also employ simultaneously and cyclically such cognitive strategies as initiation, sampling, inference, prediction, confirming, disconfirming and correction to construct and construe meanings (Goodman 1980, 1986). Both Goodman (1971) and Grove (1981) believe that the reading process in all languages is the same except for accommodating the orthographies and grammatical structures of each language. They slao believe that the whole language perspective is as applicable in L2 learning as it is for L1 learning. A consideration of several basic tenets of whole language offers significant implications for effective ESL/EFL reading instruction.

1. Lessons should proceed from whole to parts.

In traditional ESL approaches, teachers teach from smaller units to bigger units of English language, from letters to words to sentences. Materials used include grammar textbooks, vocabulary books and controlled reading books. Students often complain of not understanding what they have learned or read, and even make acrid statements like, "English is the most bitter medicine."

According to Goodman (1986) and Freeman & Freeman (1992), the traditional L2 approaches have a tendency to make language learning difficult for L2 learners because it is hard to understand individual parts isolated from contexts of the whole. Cummins (cited in Freeman & Freeman, 1992) asserts that reduced-context books--traditional ESL reading materials--scarcely provide adequate contexts to make reading understandable.

Even when L2 readers know all the parts, namely phonology, vocabulary and grammatical structures, they often do not understand the whole. When Freeman & Freeman (1992) assigned their ESL students to read a passage without the title, they could not understand the story although they were able to articulate words and knew word meanings in the passage. If the students had been provided the title which normally contains the main idea, they could have understood the story.

According to Krashen and Terrell's input hypothesis of L2 acquisition (1983), a second language is acquired when the inputs are comprehensible for learners. In whole language, teachers keep language whole and comprehensible by utilizing meaningful and

authentic literature and by immersing L2 readers in functional and purposeful language activities. Teachers also provide L2 students with extralinguistic clues such as audio-visual aids, gestures and authentic experiences. The students can then gather abundant contexts to facilitate their comprehension.

Keeping lessons whole not only makes them more comprehensible for L2 readers, but facilitates the learners' use of their previously acquired knowledge. Krashen (1982) proposes that making lessons understandable facilitates the readers' prediction more accurately. When the L2 readers comprehend the text, they can subsequently master the parts of the language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), namely new vocabulary and its concepts as well as phonics.

2. Lessons should be learner-centered.

In the transactional psycholinguistic model of reading, readers play the significant role of active meaning creators. Thus, lessons should center around learners.

Generally, L2 readers are underestimated because they have acquired inadequate linguistic competence in the target language; in other words, their experience with the L2 is limited (Boyle & Peregoy, 1990). Nonetheless, this does not mean that they have not acquired the most crucial component of reading--background knowledge. Studies in L2 reading (Robinett, 1980; Johnson, 1982, Levine & Haus, 1985, Nelson, 1987) have shown the pivotal role of background knowledge. Hudelson (1984), Carrell (1989), Carrell & Eisterhold (1989) and Grove (1981) suggest that the ESL teachers should take advantage of the knowledge the L2 readers have already

had in their first language. Their schemata should be activated and their prior knowledge extended before they read in order to facilitate comprehension. In addition, because the L2 readers' prior knowledge may be different from that of the target language culture, ESL teachers should also provide meaningful L2 texts pertaining to the readers' cultures at the initial stage of L2 reading. Lim's (1988) and Nurss & Hough's studies (1989) reveal that ESL readers demonstrate good comprehension of materials culturally close to their own experiences and cultures.

Lessons should be designed based on L2 students' interests and needs (Goodman, 1986). To obtain information about students' interests and attitudes towards reading, teachers might have one-on-one reading conferences with students or gain their responses through interest inventories (Wiseman, 1992). Teachers and students should share the responsibility for planning the curriculum. Shared planning not only makes lessons serve the L2 students' needs and interests, but also makes the students have a sense of ownership (McWhirter, 1990).

3. Lessons should have meaning and purpose for learners.

Krashen & Terrell (1983) believe that L2 learners develop a second language by natural acquisition. In other words, linguistic competence is meaningfully and purposefully developed through authentic communication. To make L2 learners acquire language more easily, Krashen (1982) and Milk (1985) suggest that language learning should be focused on using language for substantive purposes rather than focused on talking about language or language

structures. Likewise, the L2 reading classroom should underscore authentic reading. L2 readers should have plenty of opportunities to read meaningful materials for authentic purposes, but not to read practice exercises. As mentioned by Maguire (1991), the L2 readers derive any language system from what they experience of it.

To motivate and interest L2 readers to read an L2 text, quality literature should be used for reading. It promotes risk-taking in constructing meanings and helps to sustain interest. L2 readers can be exposed to literature through shared reading, sustained silent reading and reading aloud. Specifically, reading aloud familiarizes L2 readers with rhythm, intonation and syntax of the new language. Additionally, reading literature can motivate the L2 learners to appreciate the second language aesthetically in a meaningful context (Heald-Taylor, 1986).

Another way to make reading more meaningful for L2 readers is to focus on content areas reading (Blanton, 1992; Freeman & Freeman, 1988, 1992). L2 students do not learn a language for its own sake, but learn the language to fulfill their academic purposes. And, as Halliday (cited in Freeman & Freeman 1992) has pointed out, as we learn through language, we also learn about language. When L2 learners read in such content areas as science and social studies, do research on the solar system and discuss solutions of mathematic problems, they meaningfully develop both their linguistic capacities and their academic abilities.

4. Lessons should engage groups of students in social interaction.

The reading process will be incomplete without the social interaction among readers. Upon finishing reading, readers may construct different meanings from the same text, miss some important points or have unanswered questions. Having an opportunity to share individual interpretations helps L2 students clarify their questions, get a variety of interesting aspects of interpretation, as well as extend their comprehension. According to Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (cited in Edelsky, Altwerger & Flores, 1991), each reader has his own zone of understanding. When readers have interaction with each other, they have the potential to extend their zone of understanding further.

In addition, social interaction with native speakers can provide L2 learners with a better sense of the nuances of the second language. During their interacting and communicating through the target language, the L2 learners unconsciously learn how, when and where utterance should be utilized appropriately (Lim, 1988). Having social interaction, especially with native speakers, considerably motivates L2 learners to acquire and learn the L2 more effectively and meaningfully. Rigg & Allen (1989:VIII) have described about language learning as, "learning to do the things you want to do with people who speak that language."

Nurss & Hough (1989) also maintain that successful language learners tend to have a strong desire to be a part of a new language society and to take risks in experimenting with their linguistic capacities in meaningful communication. Thus, to promote the L2 proficiency of the L2 learners and make L2 learning

more meaningful, Rigg (1991) suggests that teachers should integrate L2 students with L1 students.

5. Receptive and generative linguistic competence should be developed simultaneously.

Some ESL teachers whose instruction is based on the Audio-lingual approach believe that there should be a time gap between the presentation of oral language and written language to ESL students. They also believe that reading and writing should not be taught until the L2 students can master listening and speaking skills (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Hudelson (1984) implies that this belief is a misconception. According to her study (1984), ESL learners can read English before they completely control their oral language. Miscue analysis studies in the second language (Connor 1981, Rigg 1989) also reveal that although some miscues generated by the L2 readers may alter some meaning of what is being read, they do not affect the L2 readers' comprehension.

In a language community, learners naturally use language to communicate not only by listening and speaking, but by reading and writing. To make a language classroom more natural and effective, all language modes should be developed simultaneously. According to Hudelson (1984), Carson, Carrell, Siberstein, Kroll & Kuehn (1990) and Wiseman (1992), the language processes--listening, speaking, reading and writing--are mutually supportive and interrelated. Hence, when a second language is taught, each modality in the language system should not be isolated but should be developed at the same time.

6. Students' native languages should be used for instruction.

Krashen (1982, 1983) claims in his input hypothesis that L2 learners most effectively acquire a second language when presented with comprehensible inputs. When L2 learners do not understand what is being taught in class and are not able to express their experiences, they will remain silent. Consequently, L2 professionals as Hudelson (1987), Krashen (1991), and Terdal (1986) encourage the use of students' native languages in instruction. Utilizing the student's L1 for instruction is critical in providing comprehensible inputs and in building background knowledge at this initial stage of L2 learning.

In addition to utilizing the student's first language for instruction, teachers should allow L2 students to discuss texts and to exhibit their appreciation of texts through their first language. According to Connor (1981) and Rigg (1989), ESL students are able to demonstrate their profound understandings of reading materials if retelling the stories in their native language. Finally, lessons which take place in the student's first language make L2 readers gain self-confidence and have a positive attitude toward schools. The learners are aware that teachers support and respect the significance of their cultures and native languages.

7. Teachers should help L2 learners decrease their affective filters.

According to the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983), L2 learners acquire a language more effectively when they have a low affective filter; in other words,

when they have a positive orientation to speakers of the second language, low anxiety and considerable self-confidence.

There are several factors which can make the L2 learners' affective filters increase and cause them to become more resistent to learning.

First and foremost is the incautious use of standardized tests to assess the L2 learners' abilities. Such tests do not assess the authentic competence of L2 learners as many educators such as Altwerger, Edelsky & Flores (1987), and Heald-Taylor (1986) have commented. If the teachers incautiously use standardized tests with the L2 learners, most L2 students will lose their sense of success in language learning, and unconsciously increase their affective filters. If ESL teachers are required to use standardized tests, they should be cautious in their interpretation of the results. Teachers' misinterpretation of the L2 learners' linguistic competence may enhance the learners' affective filters and make learning the second language more difficult.

Another factor causing the accretion of L2 learners' affective filters is labelling the L2 learners as Limited English Proficient (LEP) (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Smith, 1985). Labelling the L2 learners as LEP diminishes their self-confidence, and leads them to believe that they will never succeed in language learning. The label of L2 learners should be changed to something more positive such as Potentially English Proficient (PEP) (cited in Freeman & Freeman, 1992), and Readers and writers of English as Another Language (REAL) (Rigg and Allen, 1989). Such positive labels

demonstrate the teachers' belief in the L2 learners' potential to achieve in the L2 learning; they also enhance the L2 learners' self-esteem.

The last factor affecting the L2 learners' affective filters is the teachers' feedback to students. Teachers' belief that they can best improve linguistic abilities of the L2 students by correcting their mistakes immediately is a misconception. More often, such instant criticism causes L2 learners to lose self-confidence and avoid taking risks in using their L2 abilities. Teachers' responses to L2 learners should be drawn first from the students' strengths in what they read, speak and write (Keefe & Meyer, 1991), so they will feel that there is no danger in risk-taking.

Whole language has become very popular in L1 instruction. Its popularity has begun to attract ESL teachers and encourage them to translate this set of beliefs into appropriate practice with L2 learners. As more time that elapses, there will be more whole language-based research in L2 development to corroborate the effectiveness of whole language in second language teaching. Outstanding experimental research conducted in Taiwan by Chen (1992) demonstrates the superior results in using whole language in teaching ESL learners over using the Basal approach. Chen's research also serves to refute the claim by opponents that whole language has little experimental research to support it.

There is substantial research support for the belief that whole language benefits both ESL and L2 instruction:

1. Whole language underscores the idea of wholeness: lessons begin from whole to parts; learners in the language community all get involved in language activities; and all language modalities are simultaneously developed.

2. Language learning based on whole language perspectives provides comprehensible inputs to expand L2 learners' potential in learning the target language.

3. Lessons are centered upon learners.

4. Whole language respects the importance of learners and trusts their potential to reach the language achievement.

5. Language instruction based on whole language facilitates growth in both L1 and L2 (Heald-Taylor, 1986).

6. Teachers can create classroom environments which will decrease the L2 learners' affective filters and increase their potential in L2 learning and their self-esteem (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Clark, 1992).

7. Lessons derived from learners' interests substantially motivate students to learn.

Therefore, whole language should be applied to make reading in a second language more possible and effective for ESL/EFL readers.

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